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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 006642

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2016  
TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM BG  
SUBJECT: SECOND DAY OF OPPOSITION BLOCKADE GRIPS BANGLADESH

Classified By: DCM Geeta Pasi, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. In the second day of the nationwide transportation blockade led by the Awami League, one demonstrator in Dhaka was killed and several dozen injured. Clashes, however, were sporadic, the number of demonstrators was relatively modest, and the violence was less than many had feared. The caretaker government today mounted a late effort to reconstitute the Election Commission to meet a principal opposition demand, while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party threatens to launch its own program against "anarchy" tomorrow if the blockade continues. Embassy operations are close to normal. End Summary.

Violence

¶12. (SBU) During scattered clashes in Dhaka today between police and several thousand demonstrators, one activist was killed and another was critically injured when they were struck by a police van near the Sonargaon, one of the city's leading hotels. Enraged demonstrators then burnt several vehicles, including a police car, and police fired rubber bullets to disperse the crowd, injuring at least ten people. Opposition leaders appealed for the "peaceful" enforcement of the blockade program. The violence near the Sonargaon reportedly occurred shortly after President/Chief Adviser had transited the area to his office.

¶13. (SBU) For a second straight day, demonstrators shut down Chittagong port and effectively all major transportation arteries except aviation as part of their "indefinite" nationwide blockade to protest the caretaker government's failure to implement an 11-point electoral "reform" program. Schools and many businesses in Dhaka and other cities remained closed, with very light vehicular traffic.

¶14. (SBU) In Sylhet, a train was set ablaze, another one was derailed in Mymensingh, and rail tracks were removed near Siraganj, according to press reports. Inter-city air service is functioning, but an airline official told us flights have been consolidated due to low passenger demand.

Military

¶15. (C) Late November 12, the caretaker government met to consider calling on military support to restore law and order and reportedly took several actions indicating deployment was imminent. At around 2300 local, however, it released a statement denying press reports that deployments were already underway and saying that such deployments would occur only when necessary.

## Late Effort to Break Impasse

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**¶16.** (C) On November 13, Mokleshur Chowdhury, the influential press secretary of President/Chief Adviser Ahmed, conveyed to Ambassador that Ahmed plans to appoint two additional Election Commissioners in a bid to meet Awami League demands for a reconstituted Commission. Ahmed, he said, asked Ambassador to urge the Awami League to accept this proposal as the most he could do constitutionally to change the shape of the Commission. Ahmed is reportedly open to suggestions from the parties and anyone else on whom he should appoint.

**¶17.** (C) Ambassador reported later to Chowdhury that she had informed the Awami League of this proposal and that Awami League president Sheikh Hasina is willing to engage with government advisers, but Ambassador reiterated her suggestion that Ahmed contact Hasina directly.

**¶18.** (SBU) Adviser Hasan Mashud Chowdhury, the former army chief who last week went with Ahmed's military secretary to ask Chief Election Commissioner Aziz to resign, told journalists today that the Council of Advisers has approved an unspecified initiative to reconstitute the Election Commission. A committee has been formed, he said, to discuss with the two major parties what he believes are mutually acceptable proposals.

**¶19.** (SBU) At 1500 local, the caretaker government's information adviser told journalists that government officials would meet with the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party to discuss outstanding issues.

## Embassy Operations

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**¶10.** (SBU) Embassy operations were close to normal today, with the great majority of Locally Engaged Staff reporting for duty. A liberal leave policy and restrictions on personnel movements remain in effect until further notice. The area of demonstrator activity closest to the chancery was about two kilometers away.

## Counter-Punch?

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**¶11.** (SBU) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party has called for counter-programs on November 14 to stop what they described as "anarchy" and a "conspiracy" to derail elections.

## Comment

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**¶12.** (C) Both major parties are showing unexpected restraint thus far. The government has not rushed to call on military support or head towards emergency rule; the police, by local standards, have been relatively tolerant of demonstrators; the Awami League appears cautious about being blamed for a humanitarian disaster and conceivably emergency rule if its blockade were ruthlessly enforced, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party has largely stayed out of the fray, perhaps because it thinks it holds a strong position thanks to its political alliances and the basically sympathetic attitude shown it by the caretaker government. Nevertheless, political pressure not to "lose face" is huge, party positions on the Election Commission appear diametrically opposed, and the next week is likely to be critical.

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